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From Milano Film Files

Captured American Airmen Speak

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(The following is a condensed narrative of the experiences of eleven American airmen who were shot down and captured by the Germans during a Fifteenth Air Force attack on the marshalling yards at SALONIKA, GREECE, on 2nd September 1944 They were returned to ITALY on Christmas Day after escaping from their captors in YUGOSLAVIA.)

The formation encountered intense flak on the bomb run and immediately after "Bombs Away" one of the B-24's in the same combat box as the airmen's aircraft sustained a direct hit in the bomb bay and blew up. The explosion caused serious damage to their plane and the pilot gave the order to bail out. All nine men in the crew managed to leave the plane before it crashed into the ground and exploded a few miles North of SALONIKA.

The other two members of the escape party also bailed out of a B-24 which experienced a direct flak hit on the bomb run. They were of the opinion that they were the only survivors as the aircraft exploded immediately after they jumped.

The men hit the ground separately and in groups, but were taken into custody by German troops who were waiting for them to land. Two of the men were taken to the hospital for treatment for burns and subsequently removed to a political prison in SALONIKA where they were placed in solitary confinement.

The majority of the men were taken to a German military post at LANKADAS where they were forced to strip to their shorts and were searched for compasses and other escape aids. Individual interrogations were attempted by the Germans, most of the questions concerning personal and family background but the interrogations were abandoned when the Americans refused to divulge any information other than name, rank and serial number.

Two days later, the entire group was assembled, including the men who were being held at SALONIKA, and placed on an evacuation train destined for BUDAPEST. The train never got beyond BELGRADE, however, as the railroad had been cut by partisans. During the trip via SKOPLJE, MITROVICA and KRALJEVO, frequent halts were made while the locomotive was "borrowed" to move other trains with more important shipments. These delays sometimes lasted for two or three days at the end of which time the locomotive would return and the journey would be resumed.

Before they started on the train ride, the Americans were given some canned rations. This fare, supplemented by a watery soup, was the only food they had during the 20 day ride.

Unable to proceed beyond the Southern edge of BELGRADE, the train returned to MITROVICA where the captives detoured and were placed in a prison camp which had formerly been a school. The camp consisted of a group of buildings surrounded by a wire fence. The American prisoners were billeted in an unfurnished, insect infested building together with five British POW's.

The Germans provided only black bread and soup, and these in such small quantities that had it not been for Italian POW's who worked in the German supply dump and stole food for the Americans and British, the situation would have been extremely serious.

The Germans kept a close guard on the American prisoners and appeared to be afraid to give them any freedom, probably because of the extent of Partisan activity in the area. The Italian, Russian and Bulgarian POW's were allowed considerably more freedom.

On 5 November 1944, the Germans started evacuating the camp and making preparations to march on foot to Germany. The eleven Americans, together with one British POW, one Bulgarian officer and four

Russian airmen, left camp in a party guarded by 12 Germans and 12 Italian Fascist guards.

On the morning of the third day, about 37 kilometers Northwest of MITROVICA, Chetniks entered the temporary camp and demanded that they be given custody of the POW's. In the resulting skirmish the prisoners scattered but were rounded up by the Chetniks who also captured the German and Italian guards.

The Americans, British and Russians were taken to a Chetnik Corps Headquarters in the vicinity of POPOVGE where they remained until 24 November. During this period, the Chetniks, who were constantly engaged in attacking German troops and convoys, accorded them excellent treatment.

The party was subsequently taken by the Chetniks to Bulgarian Headquarters at LEPOSAVICI where arrangements were made to transport them to SOFIA. They arrived at SOFIA on 4 December where they lived at the American College until they were evacuated to BARI on 25 December.

COMMENTS: The experiences of these eleven Fifteenth Air Force airmen confirm some of the basic rules of escape training. It should particularly be noted that:

(1) Even when imprisoned and closely guarded by the German, opportunities for escape frequently arise.

(2) Patience is essential, and this combined with a full assessment of the situation with escape as the object, contributed largely to the escape of all the Americans. They were aware at all times of the presence of friendly forces in the vicinity and were prepared to make a break when the chance was afforded them.

(3) They bettered their living conditions by making friends with the Italian POW's who supplied them with food.

(4) In the BALKANS assistance can be expected from

the Chetniks as well as the Partisans.

(5) POW's can successfully refuse to give any information other than name, rank and serial number.

The End

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